

## Field of Silver Grass

He was dazzled for a moment as he stepped out of the hospital. Perhaps it was because he had gone from being inside all day to being suddenly in the sun, which was bright for October. Takafumi Douno darted immediately into the shadows of the building and sighed. He fished his cell phone out of his jacket pocket.

"Kei, it's me."

The reception was not very good, and the voice on the other end was choppy. He managed to make out one phrase.

"How's your mom?"

Douno took a step back out into the sun, still looking at his feet.

"They couldn't do anything. We lost her—just now."

A short silence on the other end. An ambulance blared its sirens as it passed in front of him.

"I see. I'm sorry." This time, he could hear the words clearly.

"The wake is tomorrow, and I think the funeral will be on the next day. I don't know who my mother was close with over here, so I have no idea who to contact."

That was not all. Once his mother's death had been confirmed, Douno had barely any time to cope with his feelings before he was bombarded with a stream of questions on which company to call for funeral services, which temple the service would be held at, and which immediate family he had already contacted. His mind was a mass of confusion.

His sister had been the one to let him know that their mother was in critical condition from a subarachnoid hemorrhage. As he boarded the bullet train to his parents' home, the worst-case scenario was already a possibility in Douno's mind. Perhaps it was crude to think this way, but his mother was eighty-four and a ripe old age. Although she had lived an energetic life with very few illnesses for a woman of her years, Douno told himself if the worst happened, it simply meant she had reached the end of her life.

But Douno's preparedness vanished the moment he got to the hospital and saw his mother's face as she lay limp in bed. He could no longer think. His heart seized up at the sight of his own mother up close in such a weakened state, especially because she had always been so healthy.

His mother now fought to keep a pulse, and as Douno sat beside her, he was flooded with memories of his childhood. It was troublesome because they all spilled out of him as tears.

"You alright?"

Douno was pulled back to reality. His head had half-sunken into memories of his mother. He pressed his forehead with his hand. It was hot.

"I'm fine. It was just so sudden, I'm just kind of flustered..."

"Am I allowed to go to the funeral?"

"Of course. I'd like you to come. Oh, but Kei, what about your work?"

"I'll finish it up today."

"You don't have to push yourself."

He thought he heard someone call his name. Douno turned around to see his younger sister

Tomoko running this way from the entrance.

"Takafumi, the funeral home's car is coming in thirty minutes," she said.

"Alright. I'm actually on the phone right n—"

"Hiroaki is coming in the evening. You didn't bring any mourning clothes, did you? Since you two have similar figures, should I ask him to bring an extra set? Or are you going to go out to buy new ones?"

Tomoko apparently did not see the cell phone in his right hand. She pelted him with machine-gun talk.

"Hold on a minute," Douno said to Tomoko before pressing his cell phone to his ear.

"Kei, I'll call you again later."

"You need mourning clothes?" Kitagawa said.

"Ah, yeah. But I'll get a set over here."

"If you're okay with getting them at night, I can bring them. But I'll be taking the last train, so I'll be pretty late."

"You have work, don't you?"

"I'll get it done. Are they the ones you wore for Shiba's?"

"Yeah. —It would be a huge help, but are you really sure?"

"Don't worry about me."

"Sorry about that. It'd be great if you could bring them."

When Douno hung up, Tomoko apologized.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were on the phone. Who were you talking to?"

"Kei."

"Kei?"

"Kei Kitagawa. The guy I live with."

"Oh, him."

Tomoko knew that Douno and Kitagawa had been living together for close to twenty years. Back in his late thirties when Douno had gotten divorced, Tomoko had gotten wind of the news and given him a worried phone call. When she had asked where he had moved to, he had told her a friend was letting him stay at his house.

"Are you really that tight on money?" she had asked with concern. Unable to tell her that the man was actually his lover, Douno made the excuse that he was not having problems getting by financially; he simply felt at ease to have someone around.

"Make sure you don't impose on him," Tomoko had said sternly, asking for no further elaboration.

Two or three years later, she began to ask him if he planned to remarry, and how long he planned to bum around at his friend's house. However, since Douno only saw his sister during the Obon holidays in the summer, he scraped through each time by laughing it off vaguely. Once he passed his mid-forties, everyone stopped mentioning remarriage.

Tomoko seemed to see Kitagawa as a kind but odd man who lived with his divorced friend. Once, she had asked Douno what Kitagawa did for a living. He had told her Kitagawa was an illustrator.

"Well, they do say people in those types of jobs are unique," she had said, convinced.

When their father passed away from cancer about five years ago, Kitagawa attended the funeral. That was when Tomoko met him for the first time. They only exchanged a few words.

"He's quite tall," she had commented afterwards.

"Kei says he's going to bring my mourning clothes since he's coming to the funeral, anyway. What a lifesaver. It looks like I won't have to borrow your husband's clothes after all."

"What?" Tomoko said, furrowing her brow. "Takafumi, you need mourning clothes for the wake. He won't be on time."

"He says he'll get here tonight. It'll be fine."

"But the wake is tomorrow. He's coming all the way here today just to bring your clothes?"

"Oh, er, yeah. He said he's got free time from finishing up some work, anyway."

"That's kind of him."

Guilt clouded his heart. Douno's sister did not know what kind of relationship they were in. He felt no need to tell her, and had no plans to do so in the future.

He did not expect his sister to understand the life he had lived for close to twenty years with his male lover. But it was no longer a question of gaining someone's understanding. Now that he was in his mid-fifties and long past the halfway point in his life, Douno simply wanted to do his best to avoid awkwardness and criticism from the few immediate family he had left.

At around eleven at night, they heard a knocking at the door. Douno stood up, stopping his sister who was about to get it. He made his way down the hallway, and before he could even call out, the front door slid open to admit a looming man.

Kitagawa was wearing a black suit. When their eyes met, the first thing he said was, "Are you alright?"

"Uh—oh, yeah. I'm fine. Thank you."

Kitagawa thrust Douno's suit out, which was still inside the plastic dry cleaner's bag.

"Is this the right one?" he asked.

It was the suit Douno wore for every formal occasion. That was fine, but—

"Did you bring it like this?"

"I thought about putting it into something, but it's not good to wrinkle these kinds of clothes, right? I just brought it as is because it was too much hassle."

When Douno imagined the man carrying the dry cleaner's bag as he transferred between trains and a bullet train on the three-hour journey here, he was simultaneously exasperated and a little overwhelmed with emotion.

"I was careful not to get it wrinkled."

"Thanks for taking the trouble. You're really a huge help. —Come on in."

Douno heard hurried footsteps, and turned around to see Tomoko approaching.

"I'm sorry you had to come out so far." Tomoko bowed her head to Kitagawa. She seemed to remember his face, despite having only met him once.

"My sympathies." Kitagawa also bowed his head.

"Tomoko, I'm going to have Kitagawa stay over tonight."

A hesitant look crossed Tomoko's face. "I'd love to have him over, but I don't think we have enough futons. Our uncle and other relatives are also staying over, aren't they? I'll reserve a room in the hotel near the station right now, so why don't you have him stay there?"

Douno had completely forgotten that a group of relatives along with their uncle and aunt were supposed to be staying the night. He had assumed it would be fine since they had enough rooms.

"Right, okay. Kei, we're going to get a hotel room for you, so would you like to come in and wait? It'll only be a while."

"I can sleep anywhere," Kitagawa said. "It's not that cold at night, anyway. I could even sleep in a corner of the hallway, wherever..."

Douno knew Kitagawa was serious, but Tomoko did not. She wore a strange expression. *Is he kidding? But why would he make a joke at a time like this?* she seemed to be thinking.

"L—Let's have him stay here after all," Douno stammered. "We wouldn't want to make him go all the way to the hotel again when he's just arrived. In this weather, he'd probably be fine just having something to lie on."

"But he's a guest."

Tomoko seemed to have more objections, but Douno managed to convince her, and Kitagawa was brought into the house. In the living room, Douno introduced Kitagawa as a friend to the gathering of relatives there. Douno's mother was laid out in a futon, and Kitagawa knelt before her with his palms together for a long time.

After he had left Kitagawa to rest in the room upstairs and their relatives had gone to sleep, Douno and Tomoko sat and talked in the living room where their mother was laid. They planned to keep a vigil over their mother for the night, but once they had run out of memories to reminisce about together, his sister began to rub her red eyes. She looked like she could barely keep herself awake. Douno suggested that she take a rest first, and afterwards, they would take turns sleeping.

It was around three in the morning, perhaps, when Douno heard creaking in the hallway. He wondered if his sister had come to switch places with him, but it was Kitagawa who appeared.

"What's wrong? Can't sleep?"

"You weren't coming up, so I came to see how you were doing."

Kitagawa was wearing his usual T-shirt and shorts as he sat down beside Douno.

"Oh, right, I didn't tell you," Douno said. "We were talking about keeping vigil tonight with close family. My sister and I are taking turns, since an all-nighter would be hard on both of us."

"I see," Kitagawa answered. This house had formerly belonged to Douno's grandmother. It had two storeys and many rooms, but it was very old. From the looks of it, his mother had only been using the first floor, and when Tomoko found out that relatives would be staying tonight, she was seen vacuuming the second floor in a hurry.

It was cool out, and the window in the living room, where Douno's mother lay, had been kept open. It had turned a little chilly after midnight, but Douno had left the window open, figuring the cold air from the open window would help keep him awake. In the countryside, there were barely any cars on the roads at night. The chirping of the insects rang out clearly.

"She was a kind soul," Kitagawa murmured as he gazed at Douno's mother, whose face was

covered with a white cloth.

"Yeah."

In the New Year after Douno's father passed away, Douno brought Kitagawa home during the holidays to his mother, who was now left alone in the house. Since Douno's sister and her husband always returned to visit right at New Years, Douno always shifted his visit so that he would arrive after they left, from the third day of January.

Why had he thought of bringing Kitagawa with him? That day, he had told Kitagawa, as he usually did, that he would be returning to his hometown on the third.

"Okay," Kitagawa had replied as usual. Perhaps it was the forlorn look on his face that made Douno decide to take him along.

Douno's mother appeared not to mind her son's younger friend, and the three spent a relaxed time together. Douno and his mother did not talk much even if they were sitting right across from each other. His mother was not the talkative type to begin with, and they spent most of the time in silence. Yet, his mother was chatty around Kitagawa. When Douno asked her later what they were talking about, she had said they only talked about little things. Nothing special.

"He's such a good listener to a rambling senior like me," she had said quietly. After that, come every winter, Douno began to bring Kitagawa to his mother's home.

It was a quiet night. Although it was false charge, Douno had nevertheless been arrested, making his mother worry. He had gotten married, but had later divorced. And as for the granddaughter his mother had adored.... *I caused you a lot of heartache, didn't I?* Douno spoke mentally to the shrunken figure in the futon.

He spotted Kitagawa stifling a yawn. Kitagawa worked at night when he was busy, but he was generally not very good at staying up the whole night through. He worked on the same schedule as a company worker like Douno, beginning his work at nine in the morning and putting away his work materials at five.

"You don't have to stay up with me. Go to sleep," Douno said to him. Kitagawa shook his head.

"Can I stay here?"

"I don't mind, but... you were working nonstop, weren't you? And then you spent all that time on the train... aren't you exhausted?"

"I want to be close to you, Takafumi."

Douno laughed softly. "Do you feel lonely sleeping by yourself?"

At home, they always slept in the same futon. At first, they had done so out of necessity because Kitagawa had no extra futon when Douno moved in with him. But even after they had sorted out their living arrangements, an additional futon was never bought. Douno had suggested buying one a few times, but each time, Kitagawa had said there was no need. So things stayed that way.

Despite what one might expect from his large stature, Kitagawa was prone to feeling lonely, and sought affection like a child. Once, when they had gone on a trip overseas, their hotel room had come with two twin beds. Although they had gone to sleep in separate beds, Douno woke up later to find that Kitagawa had wriggled into bed beside him. When he asked why, Kitagawa said it was because "I woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't touch you."

"You're the lonely one, aren't you, Takafumi?"

"Huh?"

"It's sad when your parents die, isn't it? When your dad died, you looked like you'd collapse. That's why I came. It's better if I'm around, right?"

Douno finally understood the meaning behind why this man had hurried through his work and boarded multiple trains knowing he would arrive late at night, just to be by his side. Douno felt too choked up to say anything. Kitagawa's fingers touched his.

"You can cry. I prepared myself for it."

*Prepared yourself to see me break down and cling to you, bawling my eyes out?* Douno thought wryly. He found himself laughing a little in amusement. Kitagawa cocked his head in perplexity.

"Yes, I'm sad, but I think I can hold off crying for a bit. I cried a lot at the hospital already."

Their conversation lapsed. They sat in absent silence beside each other, only their fingertips interlinked with each other. *He's right*, Douno thought. *It's different. Even if there are no words between us, it feels different from being alone.*

For an instant, Douno wondered what he was doing here. He turned around to see the darkness gradually lightening, and remembered. *I'm waiting for dawn to break.*

He heard hurried footsteps, and the sliding door opened.

"I'm sorry! I completely fell asleep..."

Tomoko apparently had not expected to see anyone else. "Oh!" she murmured in surprise when she saw Kitagawa.

"You must have been tired," Douno said to her. "I'm still alright, so you can go back to sleep for a bit longer. Kei is keeping me company."

"It's fine, I'm awake already, anyway. Besides, I need to have a girl-to-girl talk with Mom. You can take a rest, Takafumi."

Douno was shooed out of the room and to the second floor, into the west room which was about nine square metres in area. Tomoko had mentioned not having enough futons, but she had apparently managed to secure one set, which was laid out on the floor.

There was no hesitation in sharing the same futon. Most people would think nothing of them sleeping together. They had no choice, after all, with only one futon available. And they were both men.

Douno felt comfort in smelling Kitagawa's scent close to him. He was gathered in a tight embrace, and a fleeting uncertainty crossed his mind—what if his sister came in? What if one of his relatives got the wrong room? But before long, he stopped caring. If they were seen, he would just use the excuse that they were cold. And besides—he was overcome with sleepiness.

As Kitagawa gently ran his hand down his back, Douno suddenly remembered a long-forgotten memory. His mother used to rub his back like this when they used to sleep together. *Go to sleep, go to sleep*, her soft voice would repeat. It was such an old memory that a haze had fallen over it. He was choked up by something hot, and tears spilled over. When he let out a trembling sob, a large palm touched his eyes and gently brushed away the tears brimming over.

He was sad—sad, but strangely enough, not lonely.

Douno's company gave him a week off for his mother's funeral. The ceremony took place three days after her passing. Douno decided to use the rest of the four days to clean up the house. Thankfully, since it was not a rental property, they did not need to make arrangements to vacate the house, but nevertheless there were many things that needed to be put in order.

They looked for her bank balance book and her stamp, and got her pension book and health insurance card in order. They also had to go through inheritance procedures. It was a three-hour trip by train and bullet train to get here from Douno's house; Douno preferred to get everything done during this time off rather than making multiple trips.

Kitagawa did not go back after the funeral. Since he had reached a lull in his work, he remained behind to help clean up. Tomoko was only able to take four days off. She left, saying she would come back to help on Saturday and Sunday.

"Kei... Keeei..."

Douno called Kitagawa's name to let him know lunch was ready, but there was no answer. He went through all the rooms on the first floor with no luck. Kitagawa was not in the garden, either. *I told him lunch would almost be ready, so he couldn't have gone out for a walk.* Douno went up to the second floor, and found Kitagawa there sitting with his legs crossed in the nine-square-metre room, engrossed in something in his lap.

Douno peered in from behind. Kitagawa was looking at Douno's childhood photo album.

"Kei."

Kitagawa turned around in a startled manner, apparently unaware that Douno had come up behind him.

"Where did you find such an old album?"

"There're lots in the closet. And not just yours."

"I see..."

"It's fun to see so many little Takafumis."

Douno sat down beside Kitagawa.

"That was during our spring hike. I must have been in first grade or so."

A younger version of himself was standing with a younger version of his mother. Douno's nostalgia kept him glued to each page that Kitagawa turned.

"You must've been cute when you were a kid," Kitagawa murmured.

"Too bad you see nothing of that now. In fact, I'm old enough to have grandchildren this age," Takafumi said wryly.

"I think you're still cute, Takafumi."

Douno was in his mid-fifties, yet Kitagawa's face was all seriousness as he called him "cute".

"Time to eat," Douno said, feeling sheepish as he gave the man a light slap on the shoulder and went ahead downstairs. Kitagawa showed up in the kitchen some moments later. They sat across from each other and ate.

Kitagawa's habit of eating quickly still persisted, though it had improved compared to before. His plate was polished off before Douno had even finished half. Kitagawa remained in his seat even after his meal and waited patiently for Douno to finish.

Once they were done, Kitagawa began to clean up. Neither had suggested it; it had become an unspoken rule between them that whoever didn't do the cooking would do the cleaning up.

Douno left the kitchen and entered the living room. The sun was still glaring outside, but there was a breeze blowing. It was cool as long as they kept the window open. This house was spacious, like many others on the countryside. The yard in their current rented house was larger than average, but this yard was almost twice as large.

In a few years, Douno would reach retirement age. He still planned to do some sort of work after retirement, but he was beginning to think it wouldn't be such a bad idea to move into this house, as long as Kitagawa was alright with it. For one, his income would dwindle, even if he continued to work after retirement. And although their current rent was not expensive, it was still a significant amount.

If they were going to continue this life for ten or twenty more years after retirement, they would have to think about things further in the future. A long, long life with just the two of them. Douno would be lying if he said he wouldn't find it lonely. Sometimes he envied his classmates and friends who had stories about their children and grandchildren. He had had those himself once, but they had all been washed cleanly away like a sand castle in a big wave.

But if Douno were offered his sand castle again in exchange for what he had now, he knew he would not say yes. What he had built up was irreplaceable in its own way.

Douno rolled onto his back on the *tatami* floor. He heard scraping and thumping upstairs on the second floor. Perhaps Kitagawa was rummaging through the albums in the closet again. Remembering how the man had called him cute, Douno chuckled silently to himself. It wouldn't hurt to bring a few of the albums back home with them—his thoughts trailed off, and before long, he was asleep.

The sun had dipped considerably westward when Douno woke up. He looked at the clock, which indicated that it was a little past four in the evening. Granted, until yesterday there had been a bustle of people coming and going, coupled with several days' worth of exhaustion. But he had not expected to be asleep for this long.

Douno touched the nape of his neck, which felt damp and sweaty. He was also thirsty. He went into the kitchen to take a draught of cold bottled tea. While he was at it, he peeked into the refrigerator, and found they had barely enough food to last them for three more days. If he bought too much, he would have to throw it all away later—but if they kept getting takeout, it would not be good for digestion.

*I guess I need to go shopping, then.* Douno sighed with a hand to his hip. Since he had not taken the car here, he would have to walk to the nearest supermarket. It was a five-minute drive, but on foot—it would probably take a long time.

Douno went upstairs to find Kitagawa still looking through the albums, his interest showing no signs of waning. This time he had probably heard Douno's footsteps on the stairs, for he was already looking this way before Douno called out to him.

"I'm going to the supermarket. Anything you want me to get?"

"What're you buying?"

"Just some stuff to eat. I don't think we'll last until Sunday with what we have."



Kitagawa put down the album he had been holding and got to his feet.

"I'll go with you."

"If you want something, I can just get it for you."

"No. I'll go."

Since they were both leaving the house, Douno locked the door just in case, though he supposed it would be alright if he didn't. They walked side-by-side down the quiet, deserted rural road. They could see the train tracks far away. They walked underneath the overpass, climbed a steep slope, and crossed the bridge, emerging on a riverside path. Only then did they see the supermarket, but it was small and distant.

Douno wiped the sweat streaming down his cheek on the shoulder of his shirt. It was hot, but the breeze made it tolerable. There was a lot of silver grass growing along the riverside path which rustled every time the wind blew.

The walk to the supermarket ended up taking them forty minutes. Although they had not bought much, they were still loaded down, and they were two people. Douno had considered taking the taxi home, but before he could suggest it, Kitagawa started ahead of him on the walk back.

Douno followed behind, unable to bring up the topic. The forty-minute walk here was already enough to make Douno raise his white flag. Kitagawa, however, appeared not to mind long walks. Come to think of it, although Kitagawa's current work was more or less a desk job, before his injury he had worked at construction sites and places where his physical strength was the tool of his trade.

The sunset had fully coloured the sky now. The ears of silver grass rustled and swayed in the cooling breeze. The yellow-brown path and the shadow at his feet; the overpowering smell of grass—Douno's senses tingled. Hadn't he experienced something like this before? Yes, it was—

He suddenly remembered. Beside the rented house they had lived in before his father had bought their own place, there had been a field of silver grass. Douno had played there often as a child, and when the sun set, his mother would come out to the edge of the path and call him in. Douno was lulled into the strange illusion that this field was the very same one. He stopped in his tracks.

"What's wrong?"

Kitagawa, who was some steps ahead of him, turned around.

"The silver grass..."

That field of silver grass no longer existed. One day, a large sign was put up, the field was fenced off, and children were no longer allowed inside. Not long afterwards, the green field was dug up and made into a vacant lot with conspicuous chunks of brown dirt. A large store was built on that plot.

Douno had felt forlorn at the time, but the forlornness he felt now was of a different kind. That field of silver grass would never return, and his mother, who used to call him inside, was no longer here. The only vivid things were his own memories, and everything was a story of a past so distant it could be misted over.

Everything else would eventually drift along and disappear in the same way. He himself, and all the people around him, would disappear in a current no one could stop.

"What's wrong, Takafumi?"

'Eternity' was a mere convenient illusion. Some day, this man would disappear as well. If they

went by age, perhaps Douno would be the one to go first.

No one knew when the end would come. One could die tomorrow, from an illness or an unexpected accident.

"Oh, it's nothing."

It was meaningless to be melancholic about the future. Douno shook his head lightly as if to wave away his emotions. The present was more important than the past or the future. The here and now was what was important.

"I was just thinking how beautiful the silver grass was."

Kitagawa looked at Douno steadily for a minute, then suddenly turned his back and clambered down to the riverbank. He yanked a few stalks of silver grass and came back.

He thrust them out to Douno as if to say they were for him, and Douno took them. The light-brown ears, unopened still, felt soft and a little damp, like dog fur.

"Give me that." Kitagawa pointed to the grocery bag.

"Don't worry about it. It's not that heavy."

"Half and half. You carried it halfway, so I'll carry it the rest of the way."

Kitagawa swiped the bag from him and began walking briskly. Douno hastily followed him. He clenched the silver grass tightly in his right hand like a child, and ran towards the gentle shadow. His memories overlapped with his past. His hunger had driven him to run, and he had thought only of one thing. That warm place with the steam rising from the pot.

Douno laughed at himself for behaving like a child at this age. He felt comfort and security in the broad shoulders that walked in front of him. The field of silver grass rustled and swayed.

*If only I could stay with this man forever. No—I am going to be with him.* Douno turned the thought over and over in his heart.

Once the lights were turned out in the room, Douno felt a touch on his cheek. The man always touched him, but Douno felt like his fingers were warmer than usual. *What if*—he wondered. His suspicions were proven as the hand lifted the hem of the pyjama T-shirt he was wearing.

"Kei." He restrained the searching hand with his own.

"You don't want to?" the man whispered in his ear. Douno shivered at his voice, low and breathy. Even at this age, Kitagawa still desired him physically, though naturally less frequently than before.

'You're too old for that,' he knew some people might say, but Douno enjoyed sex with Kitagawa. It was a bumpy ride at first, when they were new to it. But after they had gotten the hang of it, Douno found himself able to honestly enjoy their physical intimacy.

"It's not that I don't want to, but..."

It had barely been days since the funeral. Douno felt somewhat guilty having sex in this house, where the presence of his mother still lingered all around them. As if sensing his hesitation, Kitagawa asked him again.

"Should I stop?"

So he was the only one who felt guilty for having sex. Douno had brought Kitagawa over to

this house many times while his mother was still alive, figuring it would be harmless if he introduced him as a friend. But this was reality: he felt honestly happy to be sought after like this. *I'm sorry. This man is my one and only*, he apologized mentally to his mother.

"Keep going," he murmured.

They took off each other's clothes. Their intimacy left Douno with no room to think of other things. He became completely absorbed in seeking and being sought. He figured he would be used to it by now, but he tensed every time Kitagawa was about to penetrate him. Kitagawa, apparently aware of it, always took his time leading up to entering. Perhaps it was his way of showing consideration, but when it went too far, it often made Douno lose his patience and grind up against the man himself.

Jostled by the heat that touched him and the heat that bore into him, Douno blacked out for an instant. When he came to again, the man was still inside him, burrowing deep as if to search for something.

Once they had made love to satisfaction, Kitagawa left Douno and went downstairs. The rural house did not have a shower. Perhaps that was why Kitagawa wiped him down thoroughly with a wet towel instead. The cold towel felt nice on his skin, which was still slightly flushed from the heat.

After cleaning up, Douno touched Kitagawa again and was startled to feel icy skin when it had been hot moments before.

"You're cold."

"I took a bath in the leftover bathwater," Kitagawa said, appearing not to mind at all.

"It probably wasn't even bathing temperature anymore, was it?"

"It felt cool and nice."

"You'll catch a cold like that."

"I'll be fine. It's all good."

Douno was gently enveloped by cold flesh.

"You're warm, Takafumi."

"Admit it, you were feeling cold after all."

They teased each other as they wriggled back under the covers. Kitagawa's cold skin soon warmed to Douno's own temperature, to his relief.

Kitagawa buried his face into Douno's chest affectionately, and Douno closed his eyes as he stroked the man's head. He remembered the night of his mother's death, the man standing in the doorway, holding the dry cleaner's bag with the mourning clothes; Kitagawa's profile as he said he had come because he thought it would be better if he was here by Douno's side; his shoulders as he stood in the field of silver grass—the images flashed one by one in the back of Douno's mind.

He remembered what Kitagawa had said to him once, a very long time ago. *Stay with me until I die.*

Now, he wanted to say the same to Kitagawa. *Please be with me until I die. Even in my last moments, you're the one gentle person I want by my side.*

*Last moments*, Douno thought, and he suddenly realized something. If he died before Kitagawa did, what would happen? His sister would become the chief mourner, and his ashes would be buried in the Douno family grave. Then, who would take care of Kitagawa when he was left behind? If he fell ill, if he died... who would be there to care for him in his last moments?

His mother was missing, and it was unknown whether she was even alive or dead. His relatives were the kind of people to abandon him when life got hard. Nothing could be expected from them. Even if by some chance a relative was found, just imagining Kitagawa being treated like a burden was enough to make Douno's heart ache.

He had always felt those things—tangible things—were unnecessary. But they had been young back then. Now that they were old enough to see the end of the road, Douno could not help but think.

If he was the one to go first, he did not want to leave this man behind alone. The last thing he wanted to see was his cherished person being neglected. Douno wished he would be able to die after this man, but he had already learned the hard way that fate was not so kind.

They ended up sleeping in, and when Douno woke, it was close to ten in the morning. Kitagawa was lying on his stomach, still sleeping. Douno reached out and stroked the man's short, greying whiskers, for no reason in particular. The man woke up. His eyes were still filled with sleep as he grinned boyishly at Douno. It was overwhelmingly endearing.

Kitagawa slowly sat up and kissed Douno on the lips as if to say good morning. After rubbing his prickly cheek like a cat's tongue against Douno's cheek, he stretched his arms out and arched his back. The light streaming in through the faded curtains was frighteningly bright.

"Looks like it'll be sunny today, too," Kitagawa murmured. By the time they finished a meal that fell somewhere between breakfast and lunch, the clock was ticking past eleven thirty.

"So what did you want to talk about?" Kitagawa said.

Douno had told Kitagawa beforehand while he did the dishes to come to the living room after he was done.

"Right. Have a seat here." Douno made him sit across the table. He took a deep breath.

"Kei, I'm wondering if you'll enter my register."<sup>1</sup>

Kitagawa tilted his head. *I don't understand what you're talking about*, his face seemed to say.

"By entering my register, I mean becoming my adopted son."

Kitagawa appeared to ponder a little before replying with a grave face.

"I'd prefer to be your lover than your kid."

"You'd only become my 'son' for the sake of convenience. I'm not telling you to actually become my child. We'll stay the same as we are now, except you'll be in my register."

"If things are going to stay the same, I wouldn't need to enter your register, would I?"

"I see what you mean, but... thinking ahead, I feel like it would be best to. If I happen to—and I'm just talking about possibilities—if I happen to die first, though I won't have much, I want to leave you everything I have. This would be hard to do if we're complete strangers. That's why—"

Suddenly Kitagawa's expression hardened.

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1 A "koseki" or "family register" lists all the members of a household and any additions or subtractions via marriage, birth, or adoption (as well as disowning and death). An adoptee is entered into the adopter's register. "Enter the register" is also another way to say "get married." As same-sex marriage is not legally recognized in Japan, same-sex couples often "enter the register" and become family by adoption instead of marriage.

"I don't want money, and I don't even want to talk about when you die, Takafumi."

He stood up and made to leave the living room, and Douno hastily stopped him.

"Kei, we're not young anymore," he said steadily. "Some day, one of us is going to die first. I don't know if it'll be you or me, but... if we go by age, I'll be first."

Kitagawa closed his mouth tightly and clenched his jaw. He looked like he was on the verge of tears, and just the sight of him filled Douno with pity.

"And that's all the more reason why I want to set things in order. Let's do this together."

"...My heart hurts." Kitagawa's voice sounded like it was being squeezed out from the back of his throat. "My heart hurts, Takafumi."

"It's because you're thinking about what'll happen if I die. Entering my register is not going to change anything. And if you don't want to change your last name, Kei, you can keep it. It might be selfish, but I want you to agree to this."

"I *told* you I don't want any money!"

"It's not just about money. If we're not in the same register, we might not be able to share the same grave."

"Grave...?" Kitagawa echoed.

"You and I are complete strangers. It might be fine while we're still healthy, but who's going to take care of you when you grow weak? You have no family or relatives. What's going to happen when you die and there's no one to arrange your funeral, no one to claim your ashes?"

"I don't matter. I don't care about after I die—"

"But I do. I don't want to see you mistreated. That's why—let's become family in the real sense. Enter my register, and even after you die, come to stay with the Douno family... come back to stay with me."

Kitagawa's face was vague, a mixture of surprise and hurt. Then, he lowered his eyes like a scolded child and mumbled.

"If I die, Takafumi, you don't have to stay with me. You should do whatever you want."

Heat rose to Douno's head in anger, and his hand moved before words could escape his mouth. Kitagawa raised his face as if surprised, and Douno also panicked at himself for slapping him.

"I'm sorry. That must've hurt," Douno apologized.

"...Why're you mad?"

Instead of addressing the pain, Kitagawa's answer was one that furtively gauged Douno's mood. The fact pained him.

"Fine," Douno said shortly. "If you say so, I'll do what I want. I'll put you in my register. And... after you die, I'll put you in the Douno family grave. Enjoy feeling awkward right beside my parents."

"Takafumi..."

"I think money is important, but what I want to say is... I want someone to be with you right up until your last moments."

Kitagawa threw his arms around Douno, pressing his body right up to the other man's, and Douno nearly tumbled over backwards from the momentum. He dug his heels in, but unable to support the man, he half-slid, half-crumpled to a sitting position on the floor.

The arms across Douno's back held him with such strength that his fingers dug into his skin.

But Douno could not bring himself to say it hurt.

"If I become your kid, Takafumi..." Douno could hear the man murmur at his ear, "would I stop being afraid of dying?"

On Saturday, Tomoko came out again to help clean up. By then, Douno and Kitagawa had already tidied up most of the contents of the house, but they had left the clothes that Douno's mother used to wear, unable to bring themselves to discard them. Tomoko briskly began to sort them out. She was more decisive than Douno as she divided the clothes into a pile to keep and a pile to discard.

In the de-cluttered house, Douno and Tomoko discussed the savings their mother had left, as well as taxes. Once they paid for the funeral costs, the amount left in their mother's bank account was but a small portion. It was definitely no amount which would spark a fight over inheritance.

When Douno asked if he could have the house, Tomoko told him she had planned it to be that way from the start.

"I've left the Douno household, and I have my own home now, anyway. You should move here after you retire. It's old, but I think you'll be able to live in it for a good while longer."

Douno looked at his surroundings as he listened to his sister speak. Kitagawa was not here. Thirty minutes ago, Douno had sent him to the supermarket to run an errand. If things went as planned, the man would not be back for another hour.

Now would probably be the time to bring this topic up, but he still hesitated. He would probably be questioned as to why, and he was afraid of his sister's reaction to his answer. But he felt like if he missed this opportunity, he would never be able to bring it up to her again.

"I actually have something important to talk to you about, besides inheritance and property."

Tomoko turned around while she folded their mother's clothes, ones she had kept as mementos.

"It's about Kitagawa, the guy I live with."

"Uh-huh," his sister replied. "He's a little different, isn't he?"

"You think so?"

"The things he says just come out of the blue, but he doesn't seem to mean any ill by it. I could see why you two would get along."

If he remembered correctly, Tomoko had barely spoken to Kitagawa. Douno was surprised to hear her say she thought they got along well.

"Why do you think so?"

"Why? Well, let's see... he's gruff, but he seems nice. He doesn't talk much, but you never liked talkative people anyway."

It was a saving grace, if it could be called that, that Tomoko did not have a bad impression of Kitagawa.

"Yeah, so about him—I'm thinking of entering him into my register."

"What?" Tomoko spun around. "Register? What do you mean?"

Tomoko's voice was clearly distraught as she questioned him.

"That's just what I mean. I want to put Kitagawa in my register. More accurately, that would

mean Kitagawa would become my adopted child."

Tomoko hung her head and pressed a hand to her forehead.

"Adopted child? But you and him aren't even that far apart in age."

"I'm not actually planning to make him my child. I just want him to be under the same register as me. Kitagawa has no siblings, his parents are missing, and he's not close with his relatives. I'm worried what'll happen to him after I'm gone."

Tomoko let out a huff with her brow contracted.

"Mr. Kitagawa is single, isn't he? Hasn't he married even once?"

"No."

Tomoko looked straight at Douno.

"You say you're worried about him after you're gone, but I don't think you need to go so far as to do that for him. Isn't Mr. Kitagawa the one who chose not to make his own family even though he fully knows he has no family ties of his own? Anyone would know with a little thinking that we'll all eventually be left alone as we grow old. It's Mr. Kitagawa's responsibility to decide what he's going to do after you're gone."

What she was saying made perfect sense. But there was no way Douno was backing down.

"But he really has no ties to his blood relatives. And if you've never had family close to you, how would you know what kind of things they're supposed to do for you, what they're supposed to provide you with? It would be hard for a person like him to imagine the future, wouldn't it? Both you and I had nice parents, and we were raised with a lot of care. But Kitagawa isn't like us."

"Maybe you want to give something back to Mr. Kitagawa because of all he's done for you so far, but I don't think that means you should put him in the Douno register. Entering the register means becoming family. It's not such an easy thing as bringing home a stray dog or cat."

"He's completely alone. I feel sorry for him that he won't have a grave to be put into when he dies. Don't you?"

Tomoko pursed her lips furiously.

"Then he should just arrange for one while he's alive! There are a lot of people out there who do that. Takafumi, think about it. No matter how close you are or how much he did for you, it's not normal to put your friend in your register."

"Kitagawa's been abandoned by his own mother and relatives," Douno argued. "He has no family. That's why he doesn't know what a family is like. That's why he can't imagine what the distant future would be like. He's never been very perceptive to human kindness, but he says he likes me. That's why I want to be Kitagawa's family, in the real sense."

"You keep saying he can't imagine the future, but isn't everyone aware of the fact that they age? It shows in your appearance, after all."

Tomoko lapsed into sullen silence, her brow still wrinkled. Silence wore on as they sat across from each other.

"Where's Mr. Kitagawa now?"

She appeared to have finally realized that he was not around.

"I sent him to do some shopping."

Perhaps she had caught on that he had distanced the man from their discussion on purpose.

But even if she did, Tomoko made no mention of it.

"What does Mr. Kitagawa himself say about the adoption?"

"At first he didn't know what it meant, and he said I didn't have to, but when I told him I wanted to, he agreed."

*Bam!* There was a loud noise. Tomoko had slammed the table.

"Agreed?" she said incredulously. "So Mr. Kitagawa *did* find it strange! You're the one making assumptions that he's pitiful, or that he's unhappy!"

After her outburst, Tomoko caught herself, swallowed, and looked down.

"I'm sorry," she murmured in a small voice. "I know you're a kind person. But I think you're going too far by adopting him just because you pity his circumstances. I feel sorry for Mr. Kitagawa and his misfortunes, but he's not the only person who goes through those kinds of things."

Douno clenched his hands on his lap.

"If I put Kitagawa in the register, I won't cause you any trouble at all. I'm not telling you to send us financial support, or socialize as relatives."

Tomoko sighed for another countless time. "I don't understand what's going on inside your head."

Douno could clearly perceive Tomoko's confusion and anger. As she had said, Kitagawa was a grown adult. He ought to think of the future and other things on his own without being told. But Douno could not imagine that Kitagawa would be able to arrange things smartly and efficiently for his own benefit.

Their conversation was running along parallel lines. *Should I bring it up?* Douno agonized over whether he should say it or not. Words like "contempt" and "shame" floated up in the back of his mind and disappeared. He did not want to cause ripples of disturbance in his relationship with his sister. If he could, he had wanted to take his feelings to the grave. It was hard for him to put up with demands to do this and that at his age. But "pity" was probably not enough to convince Tomoko now.

"Kitagawa is... well..." The words stuck. His sister looked at him. "Kitagawa is my lover."

He could see Tomoko's face grow pale in an instant.

"...You must be joking."

"We can't marry, since we're both men, but I want to leave him as much as I can, and I want to do as much as I can for him."

Tomoko's colourless lips were trembling.

"H... Have you thought about your age? How old do you think you are? Aren't you ashamed of yourself at all?"

Her words stabbed him in the chest. But he could not let himself back down now.

"Our relationship isn't something that just started today or yesterday. We've been like this since we started living together."

Tomoko clapped both hands over her ears and shook her head violently.

"You must be out of your mind! Two men—how could you? I've had enough of this! At a time like this, so soon after mom's death..."

"This is the only kind of time I get to really sit down and talk to you. He might enter the register, but I won't cause you trouble. If Kitagawa dies before me, I'll take care of everything. But if I



end up going first... I just wondered if I could have a little bit of your help.”

Tomoko threw herself face-down on the *tatami* floor and wept. Douno could only silently watch his crying sister.

When the sun had dipped considerably westward, Douno sensed a presence opening the sliding door with a rattle. He knew who it was from the loud, thunderous footsteps. Kitagawa poked his face into the living room and took a sweeping glance of the room.

“What happened to your sister, Takafumi?”

Douno smiled. “She remembered an errand she had to run. She went home.”

“Wasn’t she going to stay the night?” Kitagawa cocked his head.

“...She seemed to be in a rush.”

Kitagawa did not question further. Douno looked at his feet and laced his hands together tightly. Whatever that happened between him and his sister... Kitagawa would never know, and would never need to know.

He felt something on his cheek. It was soft, damp, and light brown like dog’s fur—Douno raised his face slowly to see Kitagawa stroking his cheek with the tips of silver grass.

“It tickles,” Douno said.

Kitagawa broke into a smile and thrust the bunch of silver grass into Douno’s face. He had probably picked some again on the way back from shopping.

Douno gathered the bunch from him. It smelled like green grass. Kitagawa sat down beside him, and stuck his own face into the bunch of furry-eared grass. It was such an amusing sight that Douno could not help but laugh a little.

“Should we plant those in the garden sometime?” Kitagawa asked.

“It’s not worth planting. You can find it everywhere.”

Silver grasses were weeds; they sprouted and grew on their own wherever you left them. Douno wondered why Kitagawa would ask if he wanted to plant them, and realization finally dawned on him.

It was because he had said two days ago that they were beautiful. That was why Kitagawa had picked so many on the way back from shopping, and suggested they plant them in the garden.

There was no way he could stem the flow of tears now. Douno could sense Kitagawa’s surprise at seeing him burst into tears.

“What’s wrong?”

Warm fingertips touched his cheek.

“Oh, it’s just... I remembered something sad.”

He was held close, which made it even harder to stop the tears. Kitagawa enveloped Douno in an embrace. He said nothing, and simply sat still until Douno’s tears stopped.